

Mistreatment At Walter Reed Is A National Disgrace That Demands Swift Action

By now, most of us have heard, in vivid and unsettling detail, of the scores of problems at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Wounded personnel being treated as outpatients living in rooms with mold on the walls, soiled carpets, mice and cockroach infestations. Long battles with Army bureaucracy to schedule medical appointments and to receive financial assistance. Confusion, chaos and incompetence across the board. The list goes on and on.

I was appalled as anyone upon reading about the poor treatment of our veterans at what is considered by many to be our Nation's preeminent medical facility, and promptly called on my colleagues in Congress to conduct a swift and thorough investigation.

In recent days, I have had the opportunity to meet with a number of West Virginia veterans in my Washington, D.C., office, including members of the Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. These veterans have echoed my calls. They are disturbed, dismayed, and demanding change. And with good reason. This is nothing short of a National disgrace, and it is a slap in the face to all of the brave men and women who have fought so courageously for this country.

I am encouraged that hearings are already underway. I hope this investigation will ensure that those responsible are held accountable and, just as importantly, that wounded servicemen and women are not encountering similar situations at other military hospitals.

As my colleague Rep. John Tierney said during the hearings this week, "These problems go well beyond the walls of Walter Reed. And as we send more and more troops into Iraq and Afghanistan, these problems are only going to get worse, not better. And we should be prepared to deal with them."

If something like this can happen at Walter Reed, the best known of our Army medical centers, located just a stone's throw away from our Nation's Capitol, it can happen anywhere. This is why, in addition to the Congressional investigation, I am again calling on the Administration to adequately fund veterans' healthcare. The situation at Walter Reed is a glaring example of what can occur when priorities are misplaced.

Providing for our military veterans and their families is a continuing cost of war and should be an important component of our national defense policy. It is past time for the Administration to change course, cease efforts to shift the costs of health care onto the backs of our veterans and finally recognize and implement the concept of 'shared sacrifice' with respect to the federal budget.

In 2005, fearing that veterans would see their medical services cut off or delayed, I joined Senator Byrd and a number of my colleagues in working to fill a funding shortfall. Again last year, I opposed a budget that left our veterans in the cold. I have also consistently supported eliminating the Administration's policy that excludes Priority 7 and 8 veterans from receiving healthcare, supported mandatory funding for veterans healthcare, and full concurrent receipt for retirement and disability pay. I am proud of the work we have accomplished, but know that our work is far from finished. Our soldiers on the battlefield do not back down in the face of obstacles, nor should we.

Supporting our troops should be more than just a catchy slogan slapped onto vehicles and shouted on campaign trails. It should be our solemn pledge, just as the military pledges on the battlefield to leave no soldier behind.

As John F. Kennedy once said, "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

This Administration and my colleagues in Congress need to live by their words and honor the service of our veterans by heeding my calls and the calls of so many others for quick and effective action on the situation at Walter Reed.

It is more than just a responsibility. It is our duty.

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